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AUTHOR Stewart, Harry E.
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ABSTRACT

As a prelude to graduate-level work for French majors, medieval studies are proposed for undergraduate students. Problems inherent in the establishment of the undergraduate program are identified with some suggested solutions. Concepts related to historical grammar, teaching materials, literature, and linguistics are developed. A logical course progression in the curriculum is urged. (RL)

Harry E. Stewart
Kent State University
Kent, Ohio

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TEACHING OLD FRENCH LITERATURE TO UNDERGRADUATES

It is absolutely necessary that the base of Old French literature be broadened by having this discipline accepted as an integral part of the study of French language and literature on the undergraduate level. It will be the purpose of this paper to identify some of the problems and to suggest possible solutions in order that a coordinated effort may be made to convince college administrators and colleagues that teaching Old French literature on the undergraduate level is not an impossible task.

It is noteworthy that courses devoted to Old French literature have begun to appear in the undergraduate curriculum. During the school year 1963-1964, such courses appeared for the first time in the undergraduate curriculum of three midwestern universities, and two other universities will offer similar courses within a year. Although this trend toward the acceptance of Old French literature as an integral part of the study of French literature is encouraging, there is a discouraging aspect to be considered: the lack of a coordinated effort to organize a coherent undergraduate program in which methods and goals would be at least somewhat similar throughout the nation. For example, there is a definite hesitancy to teach Old French literature in the original language to undergraduate students.

The general opinion seems to be that Old French literature cannot be effectively taught to undergraduates because of their comparatively small vocabulary, the inherent difficulty of the subject matter, or because students find sufficient challenge in French literature from the seventeenth through the twentieth century.

The traditional view of Old French literature persists: a graduate discipline to be undertaken only after intensive training in the history of the French language. It is this attitude which has prevented any real development of an undergraduate Old French program and which leads those institutions which do offer an Old French course to teach the materials in modern adaptations.

It is my belief, however, that Old French literature, in its original form, can and should be offered to the undergraduate French major. I realize that many smaller colleges and universities are not in a position to offer a course devoted to one area of literary study. I contend, nevertheless, that these schools should supplement their survey courses with texts in the original Old French.

If a defense of an undergraduate course in Old French literature is required, one need only consider the appalling and widespread ignorance of the French literature that existed before the sixteenth century. The benefits derived from such a course by those students who continue their study of French language and literature on the graduate level are obvious. Specialization and depth study, which are truly the functions of the graduate

school, can then assume greater significance for the student whose exposure to the Old French language and literature began on the undergraduate level. For the student who will not continue at the graduate level--that is, the prospective secondary or elementary teacher--the linguistic experience and the introduction to interesting materials that could be adapted for the high school or elementary levels would certainly be ample justification.

There are problems to be faced in teaching Old French literature to a heterogeneous group still struggling to form an adequate modern French vocabulary. The foremost problem, according to the traditional viewpoint, seems to be that Old French literature cannot and should not be taught until the student has been indoctrinated into the mysteries of historical grammar. There is also concern about a discipline whose major goal would seem to be translation unless medieval rhetoric and poetics are taught concurrently. Strong resistance comes from those who feel that the modern aural/oral methods do not permit translation in any form whatsoever. It is pointed out that medieval literary techniques are so unfamiliar that reading an Old French text would be little more than an exercise in vocabulary searching.

There are two other objections raised by the opponents:

- 1) good texts geared to the undergraduate level are scarce, and
- 2) the lack of trained specialists makes impossible the teaching of a highly specialized subject.

From the traditionalist's viewpoint, historical grammar is the foremost problem in teaching Old French to the undergraduate. From this point of view, a sound solution is the one reached at Oberlin College where a course in the history of the French language is a prerequisite to the Old French literature course. I am wholeheartedly in favor of an undergraduate History of the French Language course, however impractical it may seem in many smaller colleges and universities.

There is certainly a need for it, and this is ample justification. Yet, I have never been fully convinced by the traditional theory that demands a study of morphology and phonology as a prerequisite to reading the Old French language. That study is certainly a help, but not a necessity. The theory seems to be based on informational transfer, and I doubt that the study of free and checked vowels greatly increases the student's ability to read Old French. Strictly for the purpose of reading Old French, I cannot agree that an undergraduate must know how or why the possessive pronoun forms lor and lour evolved from the genitive plural illorum. It is sufficient that the undergraduate recognize these forms in context.

It is my belief that at the lower levels, particularly in the elementary survey course, historical grammar should be limited to the bare minimum necessary for the comprehension of the specific text under consideration. In the introductory survey of literature course the professor should merely identify the grammar, not discuss in detail how or why it evolved from the Latin. In the

more advanced courses, the amount of historical grammar should be increased, but the approach should remain descriptive rather than analytical, and the grammar should never interfere with the reading of the texts.

I am questioning the basic theory of a teaching technique. Is there really sufficient transfer^d information from the study of tonic and atonic vowels, of imparisyllabic substantives, of tonic and atonic datives to justify the history of the French language as a prerequisite to the reading of Old French literature? It seems to me that we should approach Old French literature in much the same way that we teach the other literature courses, that is, with a progression from the general to the specific. One usually begins in a survey course which presents selections from Rabelais, Molière, Voltaire, Hugo, Sartre, etc. One then advances to the study of a specific century to gain a new perspective and more depth. Finally, one studies a particular author or literary movement. Old French literature should be taught in the same way. One should move from the general survey to the study of historical grammar and finally to the depth study of specific centuries or literary movements. I feel that historical grammar would be much more meaningful in such a progression.

The ideal solution is to require a logical progression through survey courses devoted to specific literary periods. At Kent State University we have a total requirement of 45 quarter hours for a major in French. There are, however, only four required courses (14 hours) above the second year level: a civilization course, an intermediate conversation and composition

course, a phonetics course and an advanced composition course. Our third-year survey course is not even a requirement. The student may select from a hodge-podge of courses on Balzac, the contemporary novel or drama, Molière, etc. in order to fulfill his total major requirement. It becomes then quite possible for one of our majors to advance to the graduate level without ever having read one work from the eighteenth or the nineteenth centuries. Since the student has six quarters for work at the advanced levels, he might be required to take a survey course in each century, including a course devoted to Old French literature. Rather than thirty class hours per quarter devoted to Old French literature, the sixteenth century, the seventeenth century and part of the eighteenth, we could devote thirty class hours to each period. This would in no way detract from our present emphasis on language teaching. We could retain the present requirements, add the six surveys totaling 18 hours and the student would still have hours which could be devoted to elective courses specializing in various aspects of the language and literature.

I do foresee one problem with such a progression. Is it preferable to begin with Old French and proceed to contemporary writers, or is the contrary movement preferable? Certainly the fourth year student is much better prepared to deal with Old French than the third year student. I would welcome any suggestions.

Although I shall support any curriculum that includes the Old French period, even a course using modern adaptations, I

should prefer to see the Old French texts studied in the original language. Certainly some historical grammar must be dealt with. The student must learn about declension of nouns, articles and possessive adjectives. He must be taught verb endings. But most important he must be taught the technique of reading Old French: how to read ahead to verify a case ending, how to check the verb ending when the subject pronoun is omitted, how to guess intelligently by reading aloud and by context, what contractions and enclitic constructions to watch for. It has been my experience that, with guidance from the professor, undergraduates can read Old French literature without an extensive study of historical grammar, if one approaches the grammar descriptively rather than analytically.

Another objection to teaching undergraduates Old French literature in the original language is that without a knowledge of medieval rhetoric and poetics the student cannot fully appreciate the basic nature of medieval composition, and reading Old French then becomes a mere exercise in translation. In reality this merely strengthens my argument against the use of modern adaptations of Old French texts, since the study of adaptations is an obstacle to direct experience with the medieval language as it is to real comprehension of the techniques of medieval composition. I do not expect my students to appreciate fully the intricate structure of the Roman de la Rose, but I do not agree that reading it in the original, without fully understanding its structure, is necessarily a mere translation exercise.

The undergraduate will understand the authors' purpose, the relationship of the work to the period, and its literary influence. Furthermore, he will have had an introduction to rhetorical procedures, vocabulary, and syntax, of which courses on the graduate level can give him a more fundamental understanding.

Can a non-specialist teach Old French literature? Yes, if he is provided with a good text, even the non-specialist should be able to teach Old French literature. Certainly the scarcity of good texts is one of the most valid reasons for not teaching Old French courses. We do need a good text aimed at the undergraduate. There are probably a multitude of opinions concerning the content and approach to be used in such a text. My own feeling, after having taught Gustave Cohen's Anthologie de la littérature française du moyen âge, is that I prefer more complete selections from one or two representative writers rather than disconnected excerpts from many writers. I should prefer an edition with the difficult vocabulary presented on the page of the text, a thorough appendix that would permit the professor to teach as much or as little historical grammar as he may wish. Certainly there should be an introduction aimed at the non-specialist suggesting methods and techniques.

What I am proposing, obviously, is a curriculum that stresses a series of courses in each of which an entire literary period is surveyed. In the Old French literature course of such a series historical grammar, rhetoric, and poetics should be presented

from a descriptive rather than an analytical point of view. This would permit the student to begin reading original Old French texts in the earliest survey course, thus establishing a foundation for later specialization in an advanced Old French literature course. In the latter course the professor should teach as much historical grammar and rhetoric as it is necessary to understand the text under consideration, but the stress should be on teaching a reading technique. The technique is based on the theory that a student can recognize many forms in context without understanding their historical development. He will distinguish between the article li and the pronoun li through context. Variant spellings (fain, manbres, etc.) will provide little difficulty to the student who is taught to read aloud. A student with no comprehension of the declension of impari-syllabic nominatives and accusatives will read without difficulty "Li empereres est en un grant verger."

In conclusion, I believe that the undergraduate, provided with the necessary vocabulary, will, with reading experience, learn to read Old French with a high degree of accuracy and facility. By stressing reading techniques rather than historical grammar, the undergraduate can be effectively taught to read Old French literature. The student will not only learn that French literature did exist before Rabelais, but he will encounter historical grammar, vocabulary, and rhetorical procedures that will become more meaningful when studied in depth on the graduate level.

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